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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of birth order on interpersonal trust and sex role orientation among firstborn and only children in late adolescence. The following hypotheses were posed: (1) only children will demonstrate higher degrees of interpersonal trust than firstborn children; (2) only children will show higher degrees of androgyny than firstborns; and (3) female only children will show higher degrees of androgyny than male only children. A demographics questionnaire, the Bem Sex Role Inventory, and the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale were administered to 128 undergraduate students. The hypothesis that female only children are more androgynous than male only children received significant statistical support. The hypothesis that only children are more androgynous than firstborn children was not supported. Additionally, female only children approached significance on being more androgynous than female firstborns. The hypothesis that only children are more trusting than firstborn children did not receive any statistical support. Birth order effects do appear to exist, but in conjunction with gender effects. Female only children were the only group found to vary significantly from other groups on sex role orientation. This group warrants further investigation, especially in terms of their stereotypic feminine behaviors. These women differed significantly because they had high femininity scores, while the other three groups did not. Gender research may need to focus more on the predictive power of stereotypic feminine behavior on personality. (LLL)

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FAMILY CONSTELLATION EFFECTS ON INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND SEX ROLE ORIENTATION AMONG FIRSTBORN AND ONLY CHILDREN

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FAMILY CONSTELLATION EFFECTS

ON INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND SEX ROLE ORIENTATION

AMONG FIRSTBORN AND ONLY CHILDREN

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Abstract

This study investigated differences between firstborn and only children in the areas of interpersonal trust and sex role orientation. The hypotheses were: only children will be more trusting than firstborn children; only children will be more androgynous than firstborn children; and female only children will be more androgynous than male only children. The predictor variables were birth order and gender. Subjects completed a general demographic survey, the Bem Sex Role Inventory, and the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale. Results indicated that female only children are more androgynous than male only children. These results suggest that female only children are more sensitive to birth order and gender role influences than firstborn and male only children, and that stereotypic feminine behavior can predict differences between groups.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of birth order on interpersonal trust and sex role orientation among firstborn and only children in late adolescence. The predictor variables were the birth category and gender of an individual. The criterion variables of this study were the degrees of interpersonal trust and sex role orientation exhibited in firstborn and only children. The demographic variables of parents' marital status, socio-economic status (SES), and parental attachment were examined in an exploratory manner, and not expected to be significantly different between the groups. Based on the reviewed literature, the following hypotheses were posed:

1) Only children will demonstrate higher degrees of interpersonal trust than firstborn children, as measured by the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale (Rotter, 1967).

2) Only children will show higher degrees of androgyny than firstborns, as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981).

3) Female only children will show higher degrees of androgyny than male only children, as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory.

128 undergraduate students served as subjects on a voluntary basis. The necessary sample consisted of 32 male firstborns, 32 female firstborns, 32 male only children, and 32 female only children. A protocol was administered to the subjects, consisting of a demographics questionnaire (consisting of general questions such as gender, age, membership to the family of origin, and native language of the subject; and specific questions regarding the parents' education and occupation, marital status of parents, the perceived quality of the parent-child relationship, sibship size, ages and sex of siblings); the Bem Sex Role Inventory; and the Rotter Interpersonal Trust Scale.

The present study represents an attempt to examine the influence of birth order status on the personality traits of interpersonal trust and sex role orientation. The implications and conclusions of this study can fall into two categories: the role of sex role orientation in the personality of only and firstborn children; and, the role of interpersonal trust in the personality of only and firstborn children.

Before discussion of the main findings in this study, some discourse needs to occur about the demographic variables that were also examined. As predicted, no significant differences were found between the groups in SES. The majority of the subjects are from upper-middle to upper levels of the socio-economic ladder. On the variable of parents' marital status, significance was found, as more only children have parents who were divorced than firstborn children. One explanation could be that the parents obtained a divorce and no further children were conceived. If this explanation is valid for this population, the ages of the only children would be expected to be considerably younger than the firstborns, at the time of divorce. It is generally assumed that if a couple was planning on having more than one child, the gap in years between the first and second child would not be great. However, the average age of the only child at the time of the divorce was 9.2 years, and the average age of the firstborn child at the time of the divorce was 12.75 years. These two groups were too small for further meaningful analysis (N=5 for firstborns; N=16 for only children), but deserve future attention. Trust was higher among

individuals with divorced parents, which runs contrary to popular opinion about children from divorced homes. Significant correlations between parents' marital status and levels of parental trust and interpersonal trust indicates that this relationship also needs further exploration.

On parental attachment, women perceived that they communicated more frequently and better with their parents than did men, but did not significantly differ from males in trusting their parents or feeling alienated from their parents. Armsden and Greenberg (1987), in developing the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, found similar results, but were reluctant to conclude that women necessarily had the better relationship with their parents. Instead, they suggested that "while sex differences in a conceptualization of attachment common to both men and women is an important question (raising the issue of culturally normative socialization mediating attachment formation), separate norms may prove to have great predictive power" (p. 448). The result of this present study supports Armsden and Greenberg's results, and future research need to focus on these differences.

Sex Role Orientation

The hypothesis that female only children are more androgynous than male only children received significant statistical support with the MANOVA. The hypothesis that only children are more androgynous than firstborn children was not supported with this analysis. Additionally, female only children approached significance on being more androgynous than female firstborns.

Given these results, it appears that female only children are more sensitive to the effects of sex role orientation than male only and firstborn children. Katz and Boswell (1983) found that only children were more flexible with regard to gender roles than children with siblings. They also found that fathers were more tolerant of androgynous behavior in their female only child than in their male only child, while mothers of only children were tolerant of cross-sex behaviors in both male and female only children. In their study, as well as the present study, traditional masculine behavior is acceptable in both genders, while traditional feminine behavior is acceptable only in women. Correlations from the present study between gender, the BSRI masculinity scores, and the BSRI femininity scores substantiated this theory. The masculinity scores were not significantly correlated with gender, but the femininity scores were significantly correlated. Female subjects evidenced higher femininity scores, while the masculinity subscale did not differentiate between genders. Also, it seems that in today's society, stereotypical cross-sex behavior is much more tolerated in women than in men.

Future birth order studies involving the firstborn may need to use more sensitive and extensive measures to distinguish any family constellation influence. Perhaps measures of interaction style and attachment to siblings and peers, and parents' report of the parent-child relationship, can provide more data about how this firstborn category functions differently from only children. From the significant correlations that exist between parental attachment and sex role orientation, the parent-child relationship appears to provide a considerable amount of information regarding an individual's sex role orientation. Further examination of this relationship is warranted. Also, given that the femininity scores were correlated with gender and the

masculinity scores were not, exploration of the predictive power of traditional feminine behaviors in future gender research seems warranted.

Interpersonal Trust

The hypothesis that only children are more trusting than firstborn children did not receive any statistical support. The theory that youngest children were the least trusting among the family constellation because of less interaction with his/her parents (Geller, 1966), led to the present study's hypothesis that only children would be more trusting because of their access to interactions with their parents. The results of this study replicated the results of the normative group of the Interpersonal Trust Scale. Rotter (1967) did not find statistical significance between birth order or gender among the firstborn and only child.

In conclusion, birth order effects do appear to exist, but in conjunction with gender effects. Female only children were the only group found to vary significantly from other groups on sex role orienation. This group does definitely warrant future investigation, especially in terms of their stereotypic feminine behaviors. These women differed significantly because they had high femininity scores, while the other three groups did not. Perhaps, gender research needs to focus more on the predictive power of stereotypic feminine behavior on personality.

From this study's results, it is clear that birth order effects need to be studied in conjunction with other influencing variables, such as gender. Birth order effects on personality are not the final answer to personality research; instead, birth order is just one of the many factors that do influence the personality, and that degree of impact is difficult to ascertain because of the presence of so many other variables. However, this does not mean that birth order research is hopeless, but that a large degree of uncertainty will always exist.

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